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**Monster High: Converging Imaginaries of Girlhood in Tweens' Digital Doll Play**

Karen E. Wohlwend  
Carmen L. Medina

*Indiana University, USA*

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## Introduction

Time for children's creative and productive play is moving out of academically-oriented classrooms (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Singer, 2009; Johnson, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009;). However in digital spaces where children can gather and play with relative ease, players engage complex assemblages of imagination, consumption, production, and affiliation that converge popular media, digital media, social media and peer cultures (Burke & Marsh, 2013). These commercial online play spaces introduce children to cosmopolitan through animated rainbow-colored worlds where players belong through unifying fandom that spans media platforms and global networks. And while these play worlds are massively global, they are also intimately local. As toys and technologies increasingly converge, transmedia is within easy reach and at children's fingertips (Herr-Stephenson, Alper, & Reilly, 2013; Shuler, 2012), flowing into every aspect of everyday life. As children connect to their favorite toys, media, and games on tablets, cameras, and phones, they play in apps and websites that also converge childhood cultures, digital literacies, consumer practices, and corporate agendas. *Transmedia* are popular media characters and narratives in a line of multimedia and consumer products that the media inspire (Kinder, 1991; Jenkins et al., 2006). Popular children's toy-based transmedia franchises include Ganz's *World of Webkinz* virtual worlds, Activision's *Skylanders* line of video games, and Mattel's *Monster High* dolls, the focus of this chapter.

What hidden lessons are children learning when they play with commercial transmedia? Gender, racial, and ethnic stereotypes are essentialized and emphasized to differentiate products or to enable quick identification by shoppers in a targeted demographic. In particular, toy manufacturers often divide the market by gender, anticipating and designing for girls or boys as ideal consumers. Color-coded toy aisles are emblematic of this gender divide—pink and pastel dolls and crafts for girls, black and metallic electronic games for boys. As toy play moves online, more nuanced critical analyses are needed to untangle virtual play worlds from player identities, social networks, and commercial interests (Burnett & Merchant, 2011, 2014; Grimes, 2010, 2015; Grimes & Fields, 2012; Hafner, 2015). This article unpacks the intersection of popular transmedia and social media as a dense node of *cultural imaginaries* (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014), a key site where children's transcultural moves in, out, and across play worlds become tangled with their cultural production, gender performance, and imaginative labor. However, in this chapter, examination of the digital dress-up and online doll play that children produce and share on social media shows that players also make use of the complexity that these entanglements produce to remake imaginaries for their own purposes in ways that both reproduce and rupture normative media expectations.

## Popular Transmedia and Children's Cultural Imaginaries

To understand children's imaginative engagement with gendered cultural expectations in commercial transmedia, we analyze tweens' online play in *Monster High* (MH), a fashion doll franchise marketed to tween (6-to 12-year-old) girls. This Mattel brand is the second leading doll franchise, with an anchoring retail website [www.MonsterHigh.com](http://www.MonsterHigh.com) that provides opportunities for online doll play through arcade games, toy shopping, multimedia production, and social media affiliation. We use nexus of practice framing (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) to uncover the convergences of play, gaming, markets, peer cultures, and social media networks, looking at this complex mix in digital doll play to see how children critically engage the cultural imaginaries of girlhood—the story worlds and visions of who girls should be and become—that circulate and

converge in transmedia (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). Cultural imaginaries circulate through media franchises as children play games and imagine future or fantasy worlds together, recruiting friends and followers across social media platforms.

Elsewhere Karen has argued that doll play is a key site where players can engage, reproduce, and revise stereotypical expectations for doing “girl” or “boy” (Wohlwend, 2009, 2012). Using imagination as a social practice, children pretend to remake commercially-given media identities, change a normative pretext, imagine a new context, and expand ways of belonging in their peer and school cultures. For example, the Monster High dolls are packaged with feminine beauty ideals in a glamour pretext: girls should desire to achieve an ultra-thin body decked out in the latest teen fashions. But children can change the pretext into its parody for their own social purpose and amuse friends or attract followers on social media by covering the doll in mud or dressing it in baggy clothing. Play provides opportunities to access, negotiate, and combine multiple contexts and blend meaning potentials for 1) characters in literary and media narratives, 2) consumer expectations in brand identity marketing, 3) social trajectories in peer culture, and 4) shared expectations in children’s collaborative play. In this way, we suggest that play provides space for children to collectively enact and remake cultural texts as a productive literacy with reconstructive potential, both semiotically and socially.

### **Monster High Transmedia**

Launched in 2010, the multi-million dollar (Mattel annual report, 2014) MH doll franchise targets tween girls who have outgrown Disney Princesses<sup>1</sup>. Each MH character is a high school student who is the child of classic film monsters. For example, the six core characters are:

- Cleo DeNile (“queen bee” character, daughter of the Mummy)
- Ghoulia Yelps (“smart girl” character, daughter of zombies)
- Draculaura (a vegan vampire, daughter of Dracula)
- Clawdeen Wolf (daughter of the Werewolf)
- Frankie Stein (daughter of Frankenstein)
- Lagoona Blue (daughter of a sea monster)

The Barbie-sized fashion dolls index their monster parentage through their skin tones (e.g., gray for zombie Ghoulia, green for Frankie Stein), hair colors (e.g., Frankie’s black and white highlights refer to the Bride of Frankenstein’s black beehive with iconic white lightning streak), and fabric designs with horror motifs (e.g., bat wings on Draculaura, fur trim on Clawdeen Wolf). The dolls’ bodies have extremely thin pear-shaped torso, elongated legs and arms, and oversized heads with large eyes and colorful streaked hair. The dolls’ clothing picks up elements of current teen fashion trends such as thigh-high boots, short skirts and crop tops. Fabrics favor plaid designs but also motifs that suggest each monster’s defining features such as bat wings for vampires or wrapped bandages for mummies. The storylines run on well-worn clichés in children’s cartoons: problems arise from friendship misunderstandings, planning for

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<sup>1</sup> The Disney Princess franchise was manufactured by Mattel until 2014 when Hasbro negotiated with Disney to take over the Disney Princess licensing rights for doll production.)

high school dances and concerts, sleepovers, and shopping. The horror elements are hinted at and rendered harmless and glamorous, turning a vampire's pallor and blood-sucking into cosmetic features of white makeup and bright-red lipstick.

At approximately twenty dollars, MH dolls are more expensive than Barbie dolls and designed to maximize their value as collectables: rather than manufacturing a single doll with interchangeable clothing and accessories packs, Mattel produced multiple themed versions of each MH character. The most popular characters have many versions, derived from themes of animated films, video games, and other content released across MH's transmedia platforms. These versions of a character are differentiated by unique costumes, hairstyles, and accessories. For example, the version "High Voltage" Frankie Stein references the movie *Znap* through crimped hair and belt and leggings that light up in multi-color light shows with music and sound effects; the "Boo York" Frankie Stein version is dressed for a day of "frightseeing". (Relentless punning provides the nominal horror throughout the franchise.) The line of dolls had over 100 characters in 2015 and continues to grow with new dolls regularly added in new video games or DVD releases. Regular arrivals of "new ghouls" at school introduce new characters, expanding the franchise and the possibilities for narratives.

On the MH website [www.monsterhigh.com](http://www.monsterhigh.com), registered users on computers or mobile devices can:

- Read blog posts on the MH blog written by various characters, print blog activity pages: MH-themed party ideas, craft projects, recipes, and paper dolls
- Shop by browsing merchandise, creating a personalized wish list, and purchasing products through linked retailers
- Watch commercials for new products such as a Lego-like building set or watch trailers for feature-length animated films: *Frights, Camera, Action!*; *13 Wishes*; *Scaris, City of Frights*; *New Ghoul @ School*; *Haunted*; *Boo York, Boo York*.
- Watch character "marathon" videos constituted by pasting together commercially-produced two-three minute webisodes that have been posted on the YouTube MH channel
- Follow links to the Apple App Store and download IOS games: *Ghouls and Jewels*, *Apptivity Finders Creepers*, and *Sweet 1600*.

Some of the digital games and activities are not available on or compatible with mobile devices, with players complaining on social media about crashes and other glitches. However, with a computer and by engaging the MH full website, players could (at the time of this writing) access these basic features:

- Create and dress an avatar, make a student profile for the Fearbook, and create a student ID
- Upload, edit, print, save, or send a photo in the Haunted Photo Booo-th
- Take quizzes that test players' knowledge of MH trivia or that survey player's favorite activities.
- Create, print, or send a greeting card in Monster Mail
- Play 16 arcade-style games
- Design, shop for, and dress an avatar at the "Maul"

- Watch MH video game trailers, browse collector card videos of each character's powers, download game-themed wallpapers
- Follow links to retail sites to purchase console (Nintendo DS, Wii) video games: *13 Wishes*, *Skultimate Rollermaze*, and *Ghoul Spirt*
- Travel to the MH channel on YouTube (or another site for 13 additional countries) and watch videos, including a commercially-produced music video, *We are MH* (11,079,085 views)
- Remix MH songs *We Are Monster High*, *Freaky Fusion*, or *Witching Hour* and manipulate sound mix, add sound effects, save and email it to a friend
- Follow links to Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram and share photos of the doll characters and add comments on social media

In addition to links to Mattel's online store and other retailer's sites, the website prominently displays icons to social media sites sponsored by the franchise:

- YouTube channel with 606,062 subscribers (<http://www.youtube.com/user/MonsterHigh>)
- Instagram page with 156,000 followers who view, comment on photos posted by Mattel
- Facebook page with tagline #BeYOURSELF #BeUNIQUE #BeAMONSTER with 2.1 million followers (<https://www.facebook.com/MonsterHigh>)
- Tumblr site for the MH newspaper, The Gory Gazette (<http://gorygazette.tumblr.com>)
- @MonsterHigh Twitter account with 58,800 followers "Freaky just got fabulous. Welcome to the official MH Twitter! Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster." (<https://twitter.com/MonsterHigh>), includes retweets of fans' posts of character drawings and photos of their doll collections.

The official MH sites on social media networks regularly post about media launches and upcoming releases of doll products to create buzz and sustain consumer interest in the franchise. Marketers use social media data such as views and likes to measure the breadth and depth of customer engagement.

### **Nexus Analysis and Mediated Interaction**

To understand children's digital doll play as critical engagement with commercial transmedia, we used a contemporary approach to nexus analysis (Wohlwend, 2014), derived from mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Norris & Jones, 2005), that makes visible the social, material, and ideological effects of media convergence in children's imaginative labor and cultural production. Nexus analysis critically examines the histories and trajectories of the naturalized practices of a culture, whether peer cultures, consumer cultures, or digital cultures, that tend to normalize particular ways of "doing and being" (Gee, 1999) and uphold dominant discourses. This nexus of practice signals shared affiliation and elicits mutual cooperation (Scollon, 2001) among a group of players, shoppers, or fans.

This chapter analyzes the monsterhigh.com website, tracking its connected play spaces for repetitions and ruptures in both the content of the website and content of fan-produced media such as blog posts and videos. To do this, we use the expanded tools of nexus analysis to examine how digital media blur real and virtual play across and space, multiplying the available *interaction orders* (Goffman, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). For example, a YouTube video of a child playing with dolls is simultaneously a *platform event* as a foregrounded staged event uploaded for a YouTube audience and a backgrounded *with*, a pairing formed by the doll animator and a cameraperson collaborating to produce the previously-filmed performance (Wohlwend & Medina, 2012). In digital doll play and especially in stop-motion videos where rapid succession of still photos gives the impression of movement, the interaction orders that foregrounded are the pretend relationships and actions of the dolls within the illusion of independent animation.

Nexus analysis of MH transmedia reveals resonances and ruptures across media platforms when converging media imaginaries also converge human, doll, and digital actants and their supporting discursive expectations. In nexus, when practices repeat or support one another across imaginaries, their shared normative expectations for ideal players and performances are thickened and amplified. Similarly, conflicting practices create ruptures that disrupt the expected trajectories and the usual ways of doing things. In this chapter, analysis of website and game designs and children's YouTube videos identifies repetitions of social practices in child-made films posted to YouTube social media. This makes visible the resonances across converging cultural imaginaries as well as ruptures that open opportunities for player agency and redesign. In our independent studies of children's play with popular media, we found young players engaged cultural imaginaries in productive and problematic ways. Children wielded the power of media to both remake and reproduce stereotypical identity texts in order to best represent their lived realities and social purposes (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). Fueled by repetitions and interconnections across time and space, transmedia are reshaped and reimagined in local and global ways, where each playing is also a remaking of the dolls' meanings with impact on tweens' participation (Collier, 2013; Whitty, this volume).

### **Fanvid and Monster High Doll Play**

However, fans also create their own social media sites and channels where children can produce and share original content—fanvid—and make decisions about what to post and how to respond to other fans' comments. *Fanvid* describes the multimedia based on popular films, toys, games, and other media that fans create with digital literacies and share on social media. These video texts provide a way for fans to express their media passions with a few fans achieving a celebrity status of their own among peers in fan affinity groups (Marsh, 2015a). When fans post media, they recruit and develop a following, asking for likes and subscriptions to their media channels. Not only does this practice, build social capital, it generates material capital. Through revenue that is generated through advertisements that precede the video or run as a banner along the bottom of the screen, a single video clip of fanvid can produce up to several dollars per 1000 views (Johnston, 2014). Some MH fans have their own YouTube channels that host hundreds of videos, which are seemingly produced by--or at least with--children. The growing monetization

of amateur video is a trend that is both promising and problematic, offering opportunities for child agency and child exploitation.

### **Converging Imaginaries across Digital, Popular, and Social Media**

MH transmedia sites converge cultural imaginaries as well as digital, popular and social media, creating repetitions, resonances, and ruptures, making rich sites for children who, as knowledgeable cultural participants producers, can reproduce, resist, and improvise on such practices for their own purposes. When media converge, so do cultures. In these dense transversals across websites, values around acquiring dolls, friends, or material capital enhances their cultural capital by building reputations as MH experts with celebrity status on peer networks. In this way, MH fanvid digitizes and mobilizes doll play and dress-up, enabling agentic and problematic interactions with to popular media.

### **Repetitions and Resonances: Consuming Fashion and Reviewing Doll Collections: Dressing Up as “Monsteristas”**

One popular type of MH fanvid is the consumer review, including unboxing videos (Marsh, 2015b), product demonstrations, or doll collection reviews that often feature a child dressed as her favorite MH character narrating an inventory of her dolls, more “show and tell” than fashion editorial or product critique. The importance of selecting and dressing in fashionable clothing, repeated across the franchise’s games, clothing, and commercial media, is also repeated in these child-made productions. Like the Barbie and Bratz dolls, the MH dolls “...emphasize girls’ future roles as consumers of the various products and services required to produce normative femininity: hairstyle, makeup, clothes, and accessories...” (Hains, 2012, p. 123). Resonating with a post-feminist discourse about fashion, the ideal of the discerning doll collector supports a consumerist neo-liberal imperative to continuously consume (McRobbie, 2004) as collectors seek to purchase all the dolls in the extensive range of doll characters but also to keep up by purchasing the most recent version of each doll. One typical review closes with an admonition to viewers to subscribe to the child’s YouTube channel and to “Please leave sweet comments. [Child’s name] is only 7 years old. Please Subscribe and Thumbs up!”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWt758eANs4>

### ***Normalizing High School Popularity: “Ghoulfriends”, Boyfriends, and Digital Doll Play***

Social dramas around high school popularity recur in MH fanvid. The “We Are Monster High” music video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGawAhRjtoA>) and its fanvid emulations (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxjTYRXWwIw>), opens with a fearful and tentative newcomer walking down a MH hallway—the tension provided not by creepy surroundings but by the uncomfortable scrutiny and threat of unpopularity attached to being the “New Ghoul at School”.

The MH high school setting provides an aspirational setting and a cast of older girls for the target tween demographic to admire. Despite occasional nods to assignments and grades, the webisode narratives largely feature extra-curricular activities such as parties, concerts, or dances. In short, this is schooling and horror in the service of fashionable teenage popularity. The game content and webisode narratives stress friendliness, helpfulness, and supportive problem-solving

with making and keeping friends as the primary goal. By contrast, MH fanvid often echoes the clique and “mean girls” tropes that permeate girls’ popular media, featuring doll enactments of social dramas and fights over boyfriends and in-group status.

### ***Idealizing Adolescent Bodies through Makeup Makeovers: “Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster”***

MH fanvid makeup tutorials converge fashionista and high school imaginaries with tweens’ visions of their future adolescent selves. In YouTube makeup tutorials, girls demonstrate cosmetic techniques as they transform themselves into MH characters. In one video, a seven-year-old girl offers tips and product endorsements as she expertly applies green foundation, brushing on powder and eye shadow with smooth strokes.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-10NIJHASU>). This YouTube viral video with 34.6 million views is a pedagogical demonstration as well as a recruitment tool to attract viewers and earn advertising revenue, aligning with makeover genres and lifestyle experts of post-feminist self-improvement. The dolls themselves project a problematic ideal for a teenage body, normalized as the standard across all characters and sexualized through tight clothing. Like many fashion dolls, a uniform sexualized body ideal is repeated across MH digital dolls. For example, in Mattel’s bargiegirls.com virtual world and MH precursor, avatars displayed

a highly sexualized appearance (form-fitting and revealing clothing) ... The “identity kit” available for the avatars also sends the message that physical appearance, particularly markers of feminine beauty that conform to traditional Western standards such as long hair, makeup and enhanced features, is most valued in this space. (Black, Korobkova, & Epler, 2013, p. 275)

In a disturbing extension of the commonplace beauty ideal, MH dolls exhibit an anorexic ideal, with clothing stretched over an emaciated body shape with swollen belly and bone-thin limbs.

### ***Celebrating and Constructing Difference as Imperfection: “Freaky Flaws”***

A corollary of the hyper-sexualization of the MH characters is the anticipation of imperfection as girls fail to achieve the deathly thin body shape of the MH dolls. Post-feminism imposes a demand for a normative self-gaze in which women’s and girls’ bodies are constructed as flawed, as well as a construction of this imposition as agentic self-pleasing. Throughout the MH franchise, discourse of acceptance--of others and of selves--circulates through tag lines that encourage girls to “celebrate your own freaky flaws” and friendship narratives that address the “hot topic” of bullying (Mosbergen, 2013).

Hey ghoulfriends! Do you feel freaky fabulous when you look in the mirror? Monster High and WeStopHate are helping ghouls rewrite how they see themselves – from the inside out – with a ferociously fierce vocabulary! Those who are happy with themselves are less likely to put others down, so click below to resurrect your clawsome self-reflection.” ( [www.monsterhigh.com](http://www.monsterhigh.com))

However, the discourse of acceptance and diversity in MH is strategically partial, to differentiate identical dolls through varied hair and skin tones. Product recognition is enhanced through each



character's signature skin and hair color in ways that convey no cultural identity, a marketing strategy that claims a difference that makes no difference (McAllister, 2007; Orr, 2009). This racial ambiguity in transmedia (Wohlwend & Hall, 2016) is manufactured through the fantasy skin colors of green, blue, and purple, merge with white, tan, brown, and black colors, increasing collectability by extending product differentiation and the range of characters across MH's fantasy horror identities. In this colorful cosmopolitanism, a discursive coat of diversity serves to decorate and extend the homogenized cultural ideal rather than to interrogate it.

In summary, in their MH fanvid productions, girls are enacting their shared understandings of the dominant expectations for participation in media imaginaries of adolescence, schooling, and fashion. MH transmedia circulates and evokes reproductions of cultural imaginaries that anticipate girls' futures of adolescent sexuality, fashion consumption, and high school popularity, aligning with post-feminist discourses that advocate continual improvement of bodies, clothing, and relationships to meet norms in life-style ideals of the self-pleasing woman (McRobbie, 2004; Tasker & Negra, 2007). However, MH fanvid also builds on elements of horror in ways that disrupts these discourses in complicated mixtures of violence and parody (Fig. 1).

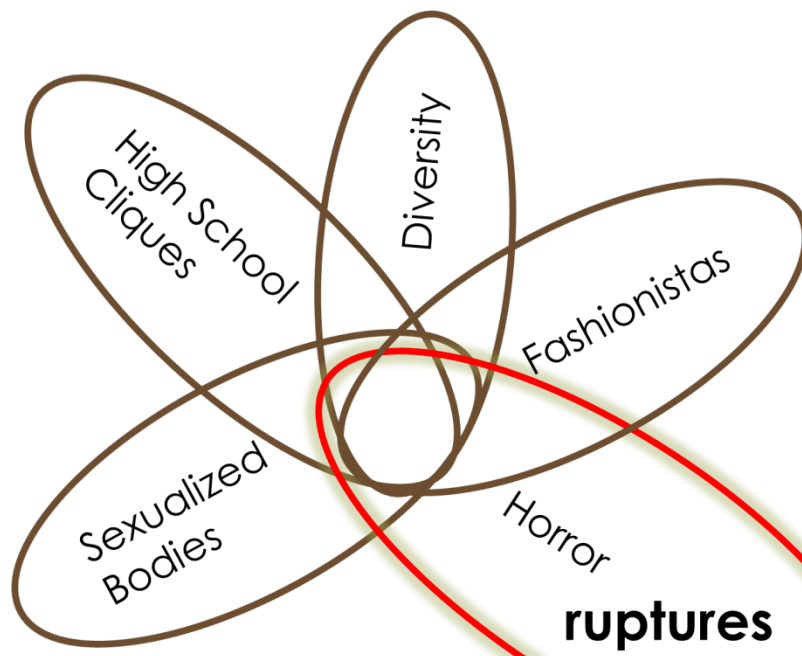


Figure 1. Horror as Potential Ruptures in Converging Imaginaries in Monster High Transmedia

### **Ruptures: Wielding Horror and Parody as Social and Material Capital**

Socially, children at play are purposive cultural participants and producers who are capable of not only remaking the meanings of identity texts of dolls and toys but also wielding these texts to access and participate in social groups and peer cultures. Children's peer cultures are shaped by their desires to belong, which often involves popular transmedia valued by children as markers of social status, tokens of shared affinities and friendships (Pugh, 2009). One

of the forces that binds peer cultures together is children's desire to keep adults out (Kyratzis, 2004); in this sense the gross and the gruesome (i.e., ket) provide valuable boundary markers to repel adults and enforce a child-only space (James, 1998).

The gloss of horror in MH is nominal, with vampires, werewolfs, and zombies reduced to their value as fashion motifs and rendered humorous and harmless by Mattel's punning. However, the selection of horror as an organizing frame situates the franchise in literary and media histories of blood, violence, and dismemberment. In this sense, horror as a resource for imagination as a social practice, offering children a powerful possibility for disruption of restrictions amplified in the resonating discourses of imaginaries of gendered, sexualized, and commodified futures.

In fanvid, as in other participatory literacy such as fanfiction, memes, and online video games, "participation is a creative act where signs are not merely consumed but rather reworked, recontextualized, and then redistributed (Steinkuehler, Black, and Clinton, 2005, p. 99). This reworking is apparent in popular MH fanvid doll play with gruesome (and giggly) attacks that replay horror tropes:

- driverless cars <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsW54CXR7go>, 2.6 million views
- zombie apocalypse (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mErgdGzB21o>),
- bloodbath and dismemberment <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w9s-5-MQo8>, a music video set to music "Blow" by Ke\$ha
- fighting game duels (e.g., MH dolls gargoyle Rochelle vs. zombie Ghoulia) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGtqMgnE28g> 3.8 million views, 33,305 channel subscribers, likes not reported, comments disabled

The number of views and likes for these YouTube videos as well as the number and content of the viewer comments, demonstrates their appeal to other MH fans on social media. While some fanvid clips simply film players' handheld doll play, others feature more advanced filmmaking techniques. For example, one viral video uses stopmotion film, callout dialogue, and special video effects to create a parody of a classic dueling video game between two characters with specific power and immunities (e.g. Pokémon or Digimon battles).

### **Repetition, Resonances, and Ruptures in Converging Imaginaries**

Convergences among cultural imaginaries produce resonances when their associated identity texts (e.g., fashionista, shopper, tweeter, and friend) repeat across imaginaries, amplifying a coherent message. Repetitions across imaginaries in MH transmedia transform the tagline "Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster" into "Be Fashionable. Be Thin. Be Popular. Pay to Play." However, convergences also open opportunities for slippages and contradictions that rupture commercially-designed spaces. These slippages among imaginaries make normative ideals visible and available for remaking, particularly during improvisation and play in media production (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). In the case of MH transmedia, the media imaginary of horror bring histories of cinematic conventions and viewer expectations of disruption and surprise that are apparent in some fanvid. These films reflect children's interest and understanding that in order to attract peers and followers, media must be engaging, and horror that parodies the dolls' messages produces mildly shocking or more often humorous endings that

attract viewers. MH fans are converging digital, popular, and social media, disturbing and disrupting, paying and playing, recruiting friends and in many cases, earning revenue. Perhaps more important, these fanvid practices also rupture our dominant imaginaries of girlhood as a space of innocence and sweetness where doll play and dress-up is not sexual, violent, or vulgar.

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